

# THE HOLY FEAST OF THEOPHANY

By Rev. Fr. Ayman Kfouf

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The word "*Theophany*" Means manifestation or revelation of God and refers to the manifestation of the Holy Trinity at the Baptism of Christ. The feast of Theophany (January 6) is considered to be the third greatest feast of the Orthodox Church (after Pascha and Pentecost). It commemorates the Baptism of our Lord by John the Forerunner in the river Jordan and the official appearance of the incarnate Word to the world.

The feast of Theophany is also called: "Epiphany, which means manifestation" and the "Day of Illumination and the Feast of Lights, for Christ, the Sun of Justice has appeared to illumine those who sat in darkness".

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FEAST OF THEOPHANY:

The feast of Theophany is the 2nd oldest Christian feast after Easter. Historical evidence indicates that the Gnostics<sup>1</sup> celebrated the feast of Theophany as early as the year 140 A.D. St. Clement of Alexandria<sup>2</sup> described the celebration of the baptism of Christ and the night vigil before this Feast, which was spent reading the scriptures. St. Clements writes: "And the followers of Basilides<sup>3</sup> hold the day of His baptism as a festival, spending the night before in readings." (Stromata, Book I: 21)

Many faithful Christians celebrated the feast of the Baptism of Christ with the Gnostics, which concerned the church, who was vigilant against heretical teachings. Therefore, to protect the faithful from associating with the Gnostics, the church officially adopted the celebration of the Baptism of Christ on January 6, along with the feast of His Nativity.

By the year 350 A.D, the feast of Theophany became more officially recognized in the church and took the names Epiphany and Theophany. This fact is evident in the Apostolic Constitutions<sup>4</sup>: "*Brethren, observe the festival days; and first of all the birthday which you are to celebrate on the twenty-fifth of the ninth month; after which let the Theophany be to you the most honored, in which the Lord made to you a display of His own Godhead, and let it take place on the sixth of the tenth month.*" (Book V:13)

By mid to late fourth century, the church separated the feast of Theophany from the feast of the Nativity of Christ. The celebration of the Feast of Theophany settled on January 6, and the Feast of the Nativity of Christ was moved to December 25 to replace the pagan festival of *Sol Invictus* "unconquerable Sun."<sup>5</sup>

## **THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FEAST OF THEOPHANY**

The significance of the Baptism of the Lord is derived from the fact that the Lord accepted to be baptized as a human even though He didn't need to be cleansed, for He was sinless. As a matter of fact, while John baptized Jesus in the body with waters, Jesus baptized John in the spirit and cleansed his soul. According to St. John of Damascus, The Lord was baptized not because He Himself needed cleansing, but in order *"to bury human sin through water"* and all of the old Adam, to fulfill the law and to grant us a model and an example of baptism.

At the river of Jordan, John the Baptist testified that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God and introduced Him as the expected Messiah. This testimony was of great significance in facilitating the beginning of the ministry of Christ and His redemptive work. According to St. Jerome of Stridonium<sup>6</sup> *"Even though Jesus had been born of Mary and had already completed thirty years of His life, nevertheless, He was unknown to the world. His identity was revealed at the time when He came to the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist."*

At the river Jordan, for the first time, the Triune God revealed Himself fully to the world. The Son in the person of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God; the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove<sup>7</sup>; and the Father who witnesses to the divinity of Christ and proclaims Him to be His only Son: *"This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:17). This manifestation of the Triune God reveals the fact that the redemptive work of salvation was a collective decision of the Holy Trinity, and officially introduced Christ as the anointed Messiah who came to redeem the world. *"The hosts of the angels trembled when they beheld our Redeemer testified to by the presence of the Spirit, while a heavenly voice from the Father cried, saying, Verily, this One on whom the Forerunner places his hands, is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased."* (Vespers Service of Theophany)

At the river of Jordan, the nature was sanctified. The descent of Christ into the river Jordan sanctified the waters and entire creation. *"Today the waters of the Jordan are changed into healing by the presence of the Lord. Today the whole universe is watered by mystical streams. Today the sins of mankind are blotted out by the waters of the Jordan. Today hath paradise been opened to mankind, and the Sun of righteousness hath shone for us."* (Service of Great Blessing of the Waters)

The descent of Christ into the river Jordan is the first official step of His redemptive work on earth. His Baptism officially starts His salvific journey and foreshadows His death and resurrection for our sakes.

The feast of Theophany reveals that the God of our faith is not an abstract and theoretical God. Rather, He is a living God, who came to earth, entered our human history and became Man so that Man may become divine by grace. Therefore, God continues His perpetual presence and His revelation of Himself in the world; and we continue to experience His Theophany until the next coming. St. John Maximovitch<sup>8</sup>

teaches: *“Every year on the day of Theophany the glory of God is revealed, renewing and confirming what was accomplished at Christ’s Baptism. Again, the heavens are opened; again the Holy Spirit descends. We do not see this with our bodily eyes, but we sense its power. At the rite of blessing, the waters which are thereby sanctified are transformed; they become incorruptible and retain their freshness for many years.”*

Every year, at the feast of Theophany, we are invited to open our hearts to receive the Holy Spirit descending from above to sanctify, heal and renew our souls and bodies. Amen!

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<sup>1</sup> Gnostics are a group of Christians who believed in heretical teachings. For Gnostics, Jesus is identified by some as an  
<sup>2</sup> Clement of Alexandria, know also as (Titus Flavius Clemens), was the first well-known theologian of the Church of Alexandria. He was born in Egypt about the middle of the 2nd century, and died between 211 and 216 A.D.

<sup>3</sup> Basilides was an early Gnostic religious teacher in Alexandria, Egypt who taught from 117–138 AD. The followers of Basilides, the Basilidians, formed a movement that persisted for at least two centuries after him. They kept the anniversary of the day of the baptism of Jesus as a feast day and spent the eve of it in reading.

<sup>4</sup> The Apostolic Constitutions (or Constitutions of the Holy Apostles) is a Christian collection of eight treatises. The work can be dated from 375 to 380 AD. The provenience is usually regarded as Syria, probably Antioch.

<sup>5</sup> Christmas was moved in the East first in Antioch by St. John Chrysostom towards the end of the 4th century, and in Alexandria only in the following century.

<sup>6</sup> St. Jerome was born around the year 340 in Stridonius into a Christian family. He was an ascetic and harsh critic of secular excesses; he was a strong defender of the Orthodox faith against the heresies of his time. He died on September 30, 420, near Bethlehem where he was originally buried. His feast day is commemorated on June 15.

<sup>7</sup> St. Cyril of Jerusalem explains why the Holy Spirit took the form of adove: "as then during Noah's time the dove announced the end of the flood bringing an olive branch, and now the Holy Spirit as a dove announces the remission of sins; there, an olive branch, here, the mercy of our God." According to St. John Chrysostom, "the dove is a gentle and pure being and like the Holy Spirit is a spirit of meekness, that He also was revealed with the same image"; "in the form of a dove the Spirit descended as the depiction of Christ's humanity as pure, sinless and true".

<sup>8</sup> Saints John (Maximovitch), Archbishop of Shanghai and San Francisco was born in 1896 and served a diocesan bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) who served widely from China to France to the United States. He departed this life on June 19 1966, and was officially glorified by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad on July 2, 1994. His glorification was later recognized for universal veneration by the Patriarchate of Moscow on July 2, 2008.